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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

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Mauritania

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Mauritania's media environment continued to open in 2012, despite a history of dictatorship and the 2008 ouster of the first democratically elected president by an army general, Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz. Abdel Aziz subsequently contested and won elections held in 2009. Since then, his administration has passed a number of reforms to improve media freedom in the country.

Article 10 of the 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of opinion, of thought, and of expression. Legal and regulatory reforms enacted in 2006 eliminated prepublication government approval for newspapers, established journalists' legal right to protect sources, and created the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector (HAPA). The authority's board members are appointed in consultation with media associations and journalist groups, a departure from the previous practice of presidential appointments. In addition to its regulatory role, HAPA is responsible for nominating the heads of public media outlets and the Mauritanian News Agency. The appointment of Salka Mint Sneid, the president of the association of women journalists, as chair of an advisory board created by

HAPA in September 2012 reflected the increasing presence of practicing female journalists. In 2011, the parliament had approved amendments to the 2006 Press Freedom Law that abolished prison sentences for slander and defamation, including of heads of state, though fines can still be imposed for these offenses. Mauritania has no legislation guaranteeing access to information. A growing focus on the promotion and empowerment of female journalists led to over 60 women benefiting from various types of journalistic training during 2012.

Though the media express a variety of views, journalists practice a degree of self-censorship in their coverage of issues such as the military, foreign diplomatic missions, corruption, and Sharia (Islamic law). Nevertheless, journalists were able to report freely on 2012 events such as the accidental shooting of the president in October and political turmoil in Libya. Extralegal violence and intimidation toward journalists has decreased over the past several years, but there were reports in 2012 of security forces attacking and detaining reporters for their coverage of sensitive topics, including antigovernment protests and slavery, and journalists were assaulted by both police and protesters while covering student demonstrations early in the year. In April, authorities arrested journalist and activist Obeid Ould Amegn for his participation in a news program on the Dubai-based satellite station *Al-Arabiya* that addressed the controversial burning of religious books. Also in April, police assaulted and arrested the editor of the French version of the online news site *Al-Akhbar*, Abou Ould Abdoul Kader, as he attempted to cover a youth demonstration. In August, members of the presidential guard attacked and confiscated the equipment of two journalists covering youth protests that erupted during a speech by President Abdel Aziz in the northwestern city of Atar. In December, police detained two journalists from the television station *El-Sahal* who were covering a sit-in protest by teachers. Both journalists were released without charge.

The print sector features both state-run and private outlets. The government owns two daily newspapers, the French-language *Horizons* and the Arabic *Chaab*, and dozens of independent print outlets are active. HAPA provides subsidies to several independent newspapers, and most papers have access to the state's printing press. Mauritania has one public and at least two private television stations, as well as one public and at least one private radio station. A public television station that began broadcasting in 2008 carries programs in the country's minority languages—Pular, Soninke, and Wolof. The number of private outlets applying for licenses has been growing since November 2011, when HAPA announced that two

new independent television stations and five independent radio stations would be allowed to begin operating, ending the government's monopoly on domestic broadcast media. In November 2012, Sahara Media FM became one of the first new stations to go on air. Some opposition members maintained that the allocation of permits favored progovernment interests. Radio France Internationale rebroadcasts locally, and Mauritians have access to international satellite television. In October, the government distributed 40 million ouguiyas (\$135,000) to 62 independent press institutions to cover journalists' salaries, internal training, and printing subsidies. In December, the Mauritanian Union of Journalists (LSU), in collaboration with the U.S. embassy in Nouakchott, distributed media vests and photography and recording equipment to journalists in national press institutions.

Internet access is not generally restricted by the government, but penetration was just over 5 percent in 2012. Mobile-telephone subscriptions are within the reach of more than 93 percent of the population. The impact of online media has grown in recent years, but existing legislation does not address the emergence of internet-based journalism.

2013 SCORES

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